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Understanding School Teachers' Perceptions of Expertise: Impact on Initial Teacher Education Programmes.

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Abstract

In 2015-16, for the first time, school-centred Initial Teacher Education (ITE) recruited more student teachers than universities did. It seems that schools and teachers are gaining more power to decide the future of ITE and to shape teachers' practice. Eliciting teachers' perceptions of Newly Qualified Teachers' (NQT) readiness and their own understandings of teaching could raise awareness among school-centred programmes and teachers about their teaching positions and potential areas of improvement, and also help universities to reposition themselves as providers of ITE, particularly in school-university partnerships. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of NQTs' preparedness for two reasons: First, to explore the perceived level of preparedness among colleagues, and second, to gain understanding of teachers' conceptions of expertise.

Keywords: Initial teacher education, perceptions, preparedness

Context

In the last 30 years in England, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has been the target of substantial policy-driven reforms (Evans, 2011; Menter, Brisard, & Smith, 2006; Murray, 2014). The reform of ITE was high on the political agenda from the 1979-1997, a period of conservative government. Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) 'liberal views' were held responsible for educational problems and student failure (Ellis & McNicholl, 2015). Teacher quality is seen as a major factor influencing pupil learning, and teacher education was claimed to be too theoretical and not practical enough for the everyday work in schools (John Patten, radio interview, LBC/IRN, 1993). For these reasons several changes were introduced, which aimed to shift teacher education to a more practical approach and force schools to adopt more responsibilities in preparing teachers, while relegating HEIs to the background (Furlong, 2013b). The underlying assumption behind this shift was that 'teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom' (Michael Gove, National College Annual Conference, 16 June 2010, reported in: DfE, 2010). It is suggested that workplace experience is the best way to offer to trainees the knowledge, skills and professional identity that are more valued by policy makers to be better prepared for practice.

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Successive governments opened the ITE market to other providers, particularly those favouring school-based approaches. Since then, not only have HEIs been allowed to run ITE programs but consortiums of schools were also accredited to deliver them. Besides the traditional university-based PGCE and other undergraduate degrees leading to qualified teacher status (QTS), the School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) program was established, allowing schools to take more control over ITE and only externalising a few processes to HEIs or consortiums of schools. Teach First was also implemented, following its success in the US, as a way of recruiting high achieving graduate students to teach at schools in challenging circumstances after a few weeks of training. In 2012, the government went a step further, introducing School Direct (SD), in which individual schools were allowed to select their trainees and take complete control over their education. In the 2015-2016 academic year, school-based ITE recruited 51% of new student teachers (DfE, 2015). SCITTs accounted for 9% and SD reached 37% of the total only four years after its implementation. Teach First accounted for 6% of the trainees. The current government is convinced that school-centred ITE, especially SD, is the best way to prepare teachers, and is pushing for its increased uptake. The Secretary of State for Education stated that, ‘these new teachers are getting the right training to prepare them to succeed in the classroom through School Direct, Teach First and school-centred initial teacher training - teachers in our best schools are now in the driving seat to train the next generation of their profession’ (Nicky Morgan, Teaching Awards, 26 October 2014, reported in: DfE, 2014). This will lead schools to have an even stronger position in the recruitment of student teachers. Thus, it seems increasingly important to explore how well prepared NQTs are, how schools understand their position as leaders in ITE programmes, how they understand teacher education and development, and how and why they conceptualise teaching and the role of a teacher in order to explore the consequences of the shift towards a School Based ITE.

Inquiry to Impact

The current ITE landscape in which schools and teachers seem to have gained more power to shape teachers’ education, and therefore the profession, at the expense of HEIs has led to a repositioning of both of their roles. Schools are still discovering how to deal with their new responsibilities and Schools of Education desperately need to find a new way to contribute to ITE (Brown, Rowley, & Smith, n.d.). It is claimed that HEIs have not been able to explicitly and decisively defend their contribution as distinctive and worthwhile (Furlong, 2013a). Furthermore, in the current school-HEI partnerships, there remain fundamental cultural and logistical barriers to effective partnerships, compounded by a lack of understanding of how each contributing institution works (Handscomb, Gu, & Varley, 2014). There are substantial differences about how ITE programmes are structured and designed among schools and providers, particularly in relation to subject knowledge, pedagogical subject knowledge, behaviour management, assessment and special education needs. Thus it is argued that a better shared understanding of what the essential elements of good ITE content should look like is needed (Carter, 2015). The way *practice* is conceptualised is also vital for ITE. Learning to be a teacher involves

engagement with established professional knowledge and practice which are traditionally seen as different aspects of the same activity (Ellis & McNicholl, 2015). The challenge is to reject this dualism, understanding the interwoven relationship between theory and practice, each mutually feeding each other.

Measuring preparedness: a different perspective?

Cochran-Smith (2001) identified three widely used approaches to explore ITE outcomes. Firstly, through evidence from teacher test scores as a predictor of teachers' competence (D'Agostino & Powers, 2009). Darling-Hammond (2006), however, argued that teacher tests have a major flaw - they are unable to discern between novice and experienced teachers. Secondly, evidence of pupils' learning. However, examination raw scores and grades are found to be correlated to socioeconomic status, ethnicity or gender (Higgs, Bellin, Farrell, & White, 1997; Patterson, Kupersmidt, & Vaden, 1990), and value added models that take these factors into account are claimed to be too 'volatile' (Gorard, 2011, p. 14) and therefore 'of little value' (Gorard, 2006, p. 235). And thirdly, evidence of professional performance, which pretends to capture what teachers know during a lesson and are able to do. This last point is discussed below.

Measuring professional performance assumes that there is a consensus about what it is to be a teacher (Cochran-Smith, 2001). Newly qualified teachers in England are expected to fulfil the Teacher Standards (TS) in order to gain qualification for practice (DfE, 2011). The standards are a list of behaviours that teachers must demonstrate to show that they are able to perform, with the understanding that these standards are what constitute excellent teaching practice. Therefore, they are related to what it is physically done in the classroom, to the practical aspects of teaching. However, some sub-descriptors also include propositional knowledge (i.e. have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject and curriculum areas or have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils' ability to learn). As it is argued elsewhere (Evans, 2011; Goepel, 2012), in England, teaching is conceptualised as process knowledge alone with some subject knowledge. However, this idea of teaching as a practice that can be instrumentally rationalised is criticised by critical theorists because it is more interested in the 'how' than in the 'why'. This approach to teaching emphasises elements as method, procedure and technique rather than the humanistic purpose of teaching practice (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). According to this, teaching is not an occupation that can be only defined by technical rationality, and therefore any list of facts and behaviours will be deemed incomplete (Winch & Gingell, 2004). If part of a teacher's knowledge is contextually learnt and its enactment depends on future teachers' situational perceptions of their salient characteristics, a list of facts and rules describing them would be limitless (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986).

Several authors have addressed the narrow conceptualisation of rational knowledge. Polanyi (2009) coined the term 'tacit knowledge' to describe what we do and know but cannot express in words. Schön

(1987) describes 'knowing-in-action' as the intelligent and skilled know-how that is openly observable, like cooking, or private mental processes, such as quick analysis of diagrams. He argues that '[humans] reveal knowing-in-action by our spontaneous, skilful execution of the performance; and [humans] are characteristically unable to make it verbally explicit' (ibid., p. 25). Similarly, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) call this kind of 'impression' or 'knowing-in-action' intuition, a way of using past experiences (consciously or unconsciously) to achieve the intended goals, even though this means breaking the rules and established techniques of the field of practice. This intuition (ibid), is what differentiates competent practitioners from those who are proficient or expert. While a competent practitioner is an expert in rule following, proficient and expert practitioners use their knowledge from past experiences in order to consider the best approach in the present situations. Therefore, teachers' expertise involve far more than what can be described in any standards list.

Capturing teachers' professional performance from a colleague standpoint seems a complementary perspective worth exploring. Following a rationalistic approach, how can a tool capture the sub-standards (DfE, 2011) 'demonstrate positive attitudes' or 'make a positive contribution to the wider life of the school' including all potential variations? Teachers share a professional environment far beyond individual classrooms. They share practices and challenges in meetings or over lunch, they plan lessons and design curricula together, share educational ends, and talk to each other. This affords teachers a distinctive position through which they can understand both the school system and their colleagues. Teachers' understanding of their colleagues could capture preparedness and expertise from a perspective that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to capture by other means.

Capturing perceptions

This ongoing investigation follows a mixed-methods approach. It involves a two phase explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) including primary and secondary teachers from the North of England. Phase one employs a survey on teachers' perceptions about NQTs' preparedness using a newly designed questionnaire. The idea of unitising particular aspects of teachers' knowledge and practice helps to broadly explore the idea of preparedness, and open the dialogue around what constitutes preparedness for other teachers in terms of propositional, practical, and tacit knowledge, by providing insights from an axiological perspective. For these reasons, three elements were selected in order to structure the construct of preparedness: a) 'Related to process knowledge', b) 'Related to propositional knowledge', c) 'Related to a critical attitude'. 'Related to process knowledge' deals with those aspects concerned with teachers' instructional practices. 'Related to propositional knowledge' refers to the propositional knowledge that can be gained in and outside the classroom. It could be used to inform practice, not only related to the content of a specific subject, but also to pedagogy and learner's development. Finally, 'Related to a critical attitude' includes aspects referring to teachers' reflection on teaching and potential improvements for practice. Phase two consists of follow-up interviews that can

further investigate the different conceptualisations of expertise. Tacit knowledge and values attached to practices, which seem problematic to explore with a questionnaire due to their personally constructed nature, are also explored during these interviews.

About the Author

Marc Turu is a school teacher and educational psychologist. He has experience in primary and secondary education in Catalonia and further education in England. Marc's research interests lie in teacher education, alternative forms of education and communities of practice. After gaining a MA in School Improvement and Educational Leadership at the University of Birmingham, he started a PhD research at Leeds Beckett University focusing on newly qualified teachers' preparedness for practice.

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